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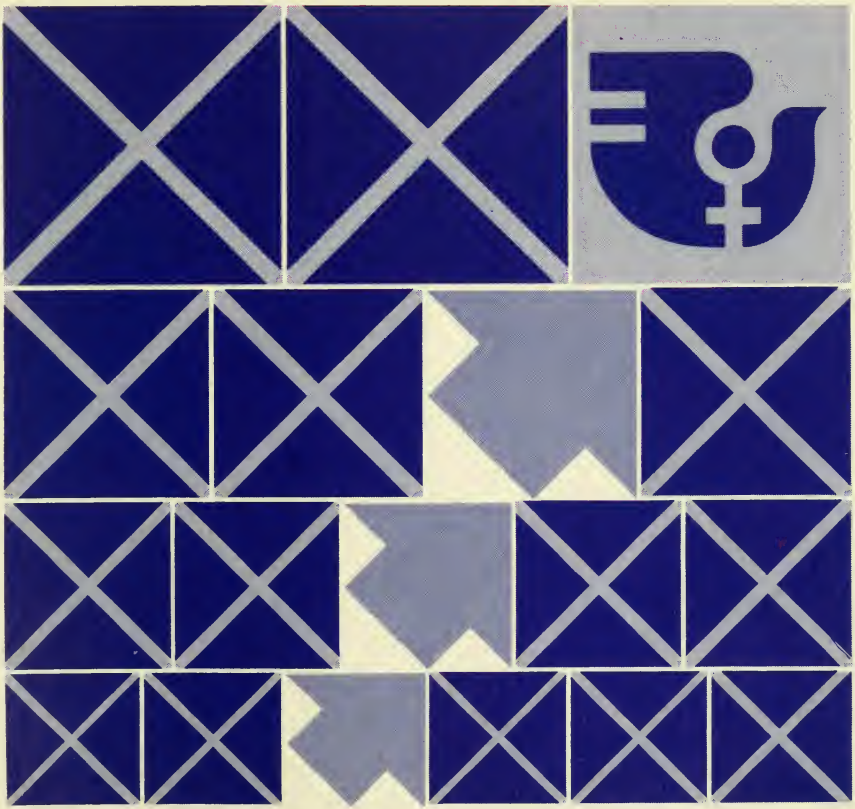

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Women's Bureaus and Commissions on the Status of Women—Avoiding an Obstacle Course

U.S. Department of Labor
Ray Marshall, Secretary
Women's Bureau
Alexis M. Herman, Director
1978

This pamphlet is the result of international and regional workshops and seminars which have revealed a number of the obstacles which may be faced in the establishment of national machinery. The material is concerned with some of the problems common to the development of viable structures which have the full support, cooperation, and commitment of governments, nongovernmental organizations, and the constituency they are designed to serve.

Resource materials which have been helpful can be obtained from the U.N. Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs (Canada Seminar, 1974) and the International Labour Office, Geneva (Japan and Belgium seminars, 1974 and 1977). National machinery resolutions adopted by the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women and subsequently by the Economic and Social Council, the General Assembly, the Inter-American Conference of Ministers of Labor, and the Inter-American Commission of Women have also provided guidance.

The U.S. Women's Bureau published a guide to the functions and services of women's bureaus and commissions on the status of women in 1975. This pamphlet complements that guide, and both can be used as models to be adapted to the needs of individual countries.

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Excerpts from U.N. General Assembly Resolutions On the Integration of Women in Development

Resolution 3517 (XXX) 15 December 1975:
...all Member States and competent organizations should give priority to the implementation of the recommendations of the World Conference of the International Women's Year in the formulation of their economic and social policies...

Resolution 3524 (XXX) 15 December 1975:
...all organs of the United Nations development system and other international technical and financial assistance programmes and agencies should give sustained attention to the integration of women in the formulation, design, and implementation of development projects and programmes...

Resolution 31/136 16 December 1976:
... Governments should establish, where appropriate, such machinery as bureaux and commissions in order to ensure the effective implementation and evaluation of the World Plan of Action and of the Programme for the Decade within the framework of national development plans and regional policies...

Excerpts from the Resolution Adopted by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) May 1978 (initial action by Status of Women Commission March 1978)

The Economic and Social Council:

...Welcomes the measures taken by Member States to establish machinery at the national governmental level to monitor the integration of women in development and to participate in measures for policy and decision-making in favour of women;

...Envisages the need for national machinery to guarantee that women benefit from technical assistance programmes and projects, and that such assistance relates to the specific requirements of women;

...Recommends that the national machinery should be informed and consulted in all spheres concerning women, and more particularly, on the replies which Member States are called upon to give to the requests from the Secretary-General relating to the implementation of programmes for the U.N. Decade for Women and the World Plan of Action;

...Emphasizes the need for such national machinery for cooperation and coordination of programmes of regional training and research institutes and regional centres for women...and to strengthen cooperation between men and women in the attainment of development objectives and goals;

...Requests that this national machinery give particular attention to a review and evaluation of progress at the national level in the programmes for the Decade, and... identify the obstacles which have prevented the attainment of national objectives and goals pursued by the national machinery on behalf of women.

> World Plan of Action: the establishment of interdisciplinary and multisectoral machinery, such as national commissions and women's bureaus, can be an effective transitional measure for accelerating the achievement of equal opportunity for women and their integration in national life...

Essentials for Human Resources Development

Regional commissions, development and statistical institutes, and national development agencies planning for the full integration, utilization, and participation of women in development must determine, among other essentials:

(1) the human resource potential of both sexes, including youth;

(2) the education and training opportunities available to adults;

(3) the extent of participation in formal and informal education and training programs;

(4) the extent of part-time, full-time, and on-the-job training; and

(5) the accessibility of education and training to the total population, rural and urban.

A priority need for the implementation of regional and national action-oriented programs is attention by planners to human resource requirements. Goals to fulfill these needs should be set within specific time frames and long range development projections.

An evaluation of the adequacy of current human power and of the human resource potential should be established. Development essentials should be defined, such as:

(1) the need for formal and informal training;

(2) the specific skill requirements;

(3) vocational training needs;

(4) relevant and expanded counselling and guidance services in career and vocational fields;

(5) staffing requirements;

(6) physical plant needs to accommodate the greatest number of men, women, and youth of both sexes;

(7) labor force projections;

(8) technical assistance requirements for human resource development planning and implementation; and

(9) institutions, private and public, that can be called upon to institutionalize human resources development programs.

Measures should be adopted to insure that human resources development becomes an integral part of development planning, and to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are shared by a major portion of the population in both rural and urban sectors.

National machinery, such as women's bureaus and commissions on the status of women, can assist governments in the assessment of the human resources and potential humanpower of a country through periodic statistical reports pertaining to current employment, unemployment, and the potentially employable. Such reports should focus on sex, age, occupation, marital and/or family status, education, etc. Consideration should also be given to the under-utilization of the human resources of the country in rural and urban settings.

Establishing National Machinery: Which Comes First?

Governments will have to decide which type of national machinery should be established first. Is broad participation desirable as a first step, or would a small unit be more feasible?

Since in many countries women's voluntary organizations have had a leadership role in self-help, social welfare, community development projects, and other activities benefitting both women and the broader community, decision makers may want to determine whether or not

(1) women's organizations are going to feel that they have been left out if broad participation in the type of machinery to be established is not immediately apparent;

(2) power struggles are evident which would deter the work of and cooperation with the machinery; and

(3) machinery established on an ad hoc basis would be an important first step (should have at least two-year duration initially). The effectiveness of the work of such an ad hoc body and its success in developing strong public support would form the basis for a more permanent type of machinery.

Commissions and bureaus must build networks of men and women -- individuals working in government, public relations and the press, universities and other educational institutions, unions -- in all kinds of positions and circumstances who share a common concern for the progress of development and for the participation, utilization, and integration of women in development. National machinery must earn status and public acceptance by the kind of performance which insures a favorable public image.

Commissions on the Status of Women

1. Clear guidelines and instructions must be included in the instrument that establishes the commission. Also, members should be appointed who can contribute the most to stated priorities through commitment, professionalism, expertise, varied experiences, and community organization activities.

2. Commission members should know where to go for pertinent information. Resources (education, information, research, individual leaders with experience and expertise, etc.) of the country should be known and used to insure cooperative and coordinated approaches to issues.

   Committees, task force groups, advisory bodies, etc., may be created to insure continuing voluntary support for objectives. Individuals and organizations will provide helpful information on their own initiative if they know their contributions will be used constructively.

3. A commission has the advantage (depending on the situation in a given country) of enlisting the services of a number of men and women who come from a wide range of economic, educational, religious, social service, governmental, and nongovernmental backgrounds. This kind of representation, which encourages cross fertilizing of projects and ideas, is one of the most effective means of creating favorable public opinion and effecting progress toward goals and objectives.

This wide range of interests, however, can lead to difficulties in reaching a consensus and achieving the desired cooperation of the full membership. If this is foreseen, the establishment of several long and short-term action targets could involve members in committees requiring the skills and abilities of individual members.

4. Commissions that rely on the services of their appointed members to carry out their work can overtax a few dedicated, responsible individuals. It is essential that funds allotted to this machinery cover payment to professional staff persons (a secretariat) who work closely with commission chairpersons and executive committees. The size of the staff and the nature of its work depend on the budget and range of commission activities.

5. The success of commission undertakings depends on a solid relationship between the secretariat and appointed members. The commission chairperson should schedule periodic meetings with the secretariat staff to insure mutual understanding of commission priorities.

   Secretariat staff, insofar as possible, should exhibit a commitment to the goals of the commission, have organization and communication skills, and display an ability to implement commission policies.

6. Commissions often suffer from inactive members. Commissions have an obligation to motivate and stimulate the participation of members, and to establish firm rules of membership. The best protection, of course, is to

have membership requirements set forth in the executive order, legislative act, or decree which creates this machinery.

If there is a delay in capturing the interest of members through the assignment of specific responsibilities, or due to the lack of experience in or orientation to government operations, or a clear understanding of the functions and services of the commission, this machinery can deteriorate, often to the point of non-revival.

Women's Bureaus

1. If permanent machinery, such as a women's bureau, is established first, the value of getting the cooperation of government departments/ministries and of nongovernmental organizations in advance of the creation of the commission cannot be over-estimated.

2. An active bureau with good leadership can ensure a steady flow of information to facilitate planning priorities for commission work.

3. The bureau's collection and analysis of data to present a clear picture of the condition of women strengthens recommendations for action.

4. Staffing through a selection of civil servants (economists, lawyers, social science analysts, administrative and clerical personnel) would provide staff already on the payroll and thus lighten the load on strained budgets.

5. Beginning with a comparatively small unit may lead to a higher degree of compatibility and teamwork.

6. A permanent bureau can provide sustained attention to the integration of women in development through its daily contact with government planners and policy/decision makers.

   The participation of the director of the bureau in policy level discussions provides an opportunity to insure that the activities, programs, and projects of government departments/ministries, as well as legislative proposals, serve the best interests of women and men. It can also influence the issuance of policy directives which strengthen and promote the progress of women.

   Usually a bureau has a larger staff than a commission secretariat, and has access to broad subject categories of current materials on a continuing basis.

Do Governments Need Both Types of Machinery?

Whether a country needs both types of machinery depends on the location, the purpose and/or functions of the machinery.

If established in a ministry, such as the Ministry of Labor or Ministry of Social Welfare, and the functions and services are limited to those of that ministry, women may feel that there are broader needs which should be given attention. In many countries, this situation has led to the creation of *ad hoc* commissions to make a thorough study of the conditions of women. Recommendations have been submitted to governments and, in some instances, have led to the establishment of permanent advisory bodies which monitor implementation of recommendations, continue to research neglected areas, and inform governments of needed action.

National machinery, such as bureaus and commissions, should be located at the focal point of all government activity and should have very broad terms of reference and authority related to working relationships with government departments/ministries. This should be mandated in the instrument of establishment.

Can Bureaus and Commissions Be Confused With Women's Voluntary Organizations?

Usually not, for the following reasons:

1. Voluntary organizations do not function as part of the administrative framework of governments.

2. Women's voluntary organizations sometimes limit membership and benefits to women. Men and women share the functions and services of national machinery as members and/or staff.

3. Bureaus and commissions should have a mandate from their governments to assist in the formulation of policies affecting the economic, social, and cultural life of the country.

4. Bureaus and commissions should receive annual budget allocations and report to governments on a regular basis.

5. Members/staff of national machinery must have compatible working relationships with all departments/ministries of governments.

Initial Steps After National Machinery Has Been Established

1. Members and/or personnel of national machinery should:

   (a) become familiar with the organization, structure, functions and services of government departments and/or ministries in order to carry out their work effectively. The machinery will often

be called upon to serve as an information, resource and referral agency, and to answer a wide range of queries from constituents;

(b) survey the data collection and statistical reporting available in the various government departments. Are methods used uniform? Do the categories include (among other pertinent data) geographical distribution, sex, age, marital status, and heads of households? Will present categories adequately serve the evaluating, reporting, and factual needs of the machinery? What are other nongovernmental and private agencies, including educational institutions, doing in research and data collection in these areas?

(c) review legislation. Do present laws (employment, social welfare, marriage, property, etc.) cover men and women? Are there inequities? Are the legal needs of women met? What kinds of implementation machinery have been created to monitor and enforce legislation, and how effective is it?

(d) gather information about the technical assistance in the country. Which international, regional, or national agencies or governments provide technical assistance? What kind of projects have been activated? What is the participation by women? What kinds of technical assistance and training are available which would provide greater benefits to women?

(e) prepare for the dissemination of information. Does the budget cover publishing and other forms of printing and preparation of materials for distribution? What will be the role of the Ministry of Information and/or government printing office for assistance with publications?

2. The officers and staff of national machinery should fully understand their responsibilities for reporting to ministries and/or heads of governments, as well as their right to make information available to the public. They should also insure that they are fully informed about all matters pertaining to women, and that they act in an advisory capacity to all government agencies, including legal and parliamentary bodies.

3. After an adequate orientation and organization period, a determination should be made regarding the need to establish advisory groups. These should be spread throughout the country to insure that the national machinery receives current information on the needs of all women, their participation in government projects and technical assistance programs, etc. Representatives of these groups could become members of a permanent commission on women in development should a bureau be established first.

4. Procedure should be developed for periodic review and appraisal (at least every two years) of all key government programs in order to assess the extent to which women are equal participants and/or beneficiaries.

Review and appraisal procedures should include an overall assessment of current development programs and projects, an evaluation of their relevance for women, the adequacy of current financial support, and a judgment as to whether all efforts meet the objectives and goals of national governments, regional plans of action, and the World Plan of Action.

Review and appraisal procedures should also include an evaluation of women's voluntary organization projects to determine whether or not they should be strengthened through support (financial, technical assistance) from national governments in their efforts to meet the needs of women.

Strategies Which Can Strengthen the Structure, Functions, and Services of National Machinery

1. Consultations with nongovernmental and voluntary organizations concerned with programs and projects which benefit women provide an opportunity for the national machinery to share information pertaining to government priorities. Such consultations also lead to better coordination and cooperation, thus eliminating much duplication of effort and developing a strong, supportive constituency which participates in the development goals of the country. Ideally, such consultations should take place (on a formal basis) at least once per quarter (four times per year).

2. Research should go hand in hand with plans for development. Staff and faculties of higher education institutions will no doubt find it advantageous to become engaged in research projects. A thorough knowledge of current research is essential before additional plans are initiated for supplemental research and data collection activities.

3. If citizens are to make acceptable proposals for change, they will want first to know as much as they can about their government, its structure and functions, what it can do and what it cannot do. Government departments often have published materials which can be made available to citizens prior to appointments with officials.

   Knowledge of legislative procedures in parliamentary bodies is of value, as well as knowledge of the steps which must be taken to enact, change, enforce, or amend legislation. An understanding of the degree of autonomy of provincial or district governments can assist in developing feasible proposals for local projects.

4. Clear, well-defined objectives and goals must be kept in mind to accomplish desired results and to constructively direct energies. Cooperative partnerships are essential to the accomplishment of goals which are often beyond the capability of a single person or organizational unit. Joint efforts provide the mechanism for results which affect the greatest number of people.

5. After objectives and goals are developed (usually on an annual or fiscal year basis) and approved by the appropriate government authority, they require frequent communication to pertinent agencies and departments, selective revision in accordance with changing needs, regular monitoring in terms of implementation, and clear-sighted evaluation as to their effectiveness.

6. Staffs of national machinery must avoid duplication of services offered by other government departments, and must act to coordinate and strengthen these services as they relate to the problems, integration, utilization, and participation of women in development.

Data Collection

Among the major deficiencies in the data collection field is definitive, comparative data pertaining to the female portion of the population. There is a need for comprehensive factual information that will allow for better analyses of the roles of rural and urban women in the economy and of the changes in status and roles of women and men over designated periods of time.

One of the disadvantages of dependency on national census data is the infrequency of national censuses. They generally occur only every ten years or so. The patterns of women's lives change more frequently. This means that policy and decision makers should have the benefit of continuing research through surveys, questionnaires, and other more informal data collection methods.

The availability of factual, relevant data alleviates guesswork, reveals the extent and nature of problems, and stimulates realistic support for action to reduce unfavorable conditions.

National machinery such as women's bureaus and commissions on the status of women and/or the role of women in development can serve as fact-finding arms of governments.

Technical assistance from international organizations, donor governments and agencies, university students and faculty, and public and private institutes can serve to strengthen and develop research capabilities.

International Women's Year, 1975, caused a reassessment of the impact of government programs on women in many countries and reemphasized the need to refine or create research and data collection centers. The Decade for Women, 1976-1985, may bring significant progress in the availability of qualitative and quantitative data on women.

Summary

1. National machinery, such as women's bureaus and commissions, which is established at the policy and decision-making levels of governments, can bring about the integration of women in the development process and enhance the progress and benefits which will accrue to women and men as contributors to development.

2. Some governments may decide to establish both types of machinery by issuing a decree, executive order, or legislative mandate which sets forth the duties and responsibilities of a commission, as an advisory body, and a bureau, as a permanent secretariat. This decision will be made in consideration of the needs and resources, human and financial, of the country. Other governments may decide to establish one or the other.

3. Since commissions are usually advisory bodies, it is essential that executive machinery be created within the administrative framework of governments to give attention to implementation of the recommendations of the commission. This may call for cooperative action by several government departments.

4. The decision leading to the establishment of national machinery should be made as a result of joint consultations between governmental representatives and the women of the country. The machinery should be set up under an act which defines its functions clearly and which guarantees continuity in its work.

5. The choice of a model is less important than (1) the effectiveness of the staff and/or members of the advisory body; (2) the influence it has on government policies and decisions; (3) the knowledge it acquires of the total government structure; (4) its ability to develop good public relations and compatible relationships with government officials, the public, and private nongovernmental organizations.

   It must also exhibit a capacity for carrying out the mandate delegated in the instrument which established the machinery.

6. It is essential that community resources (individual and group expertise, educational institutions, women's organizations, research, civic, social, and cultural groups) become known to national machinery personnel and that these resources be called upon to assist in the work, programs, and projects of the machinery.

7. The recommendations of advisory bodies should be given wide dissemination, and up-to-date news of progress on issues of concern to women should be provided to members of legislatures, government administration, and the mass communications media.

8. National machinery, such as women's bureaus and commissions on the status of women, can accelerate progress toward the full integration of women in development, and toward achieving the objectives and goals of international, regional, and national plans of action. Bureaus and commissions can also insure that women become contributors as well as beneficiaries of economic growth in partnership with men.

Activities of Organs Within the United Nations System

The following seminars and/or workshops on national machinery have been cosponsored by bodies of the United Nations system in cooperation with national governments during the period 1974-1977:

The United Nations and the Government of Canada (1974)

The International Labour Organisation and the Government of Japan (1974)

The International Labour Organisation and the Government of Belgium (1977)

The African Training and Research Centre for Women, U.N. Economic Commission for Africa, in cooperation with national governments of member countries (1974-1977)

The United Nations and the Government of Nepal (1977)

Regional Activities: Western Hemisphere

The U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America has a mandate to develop programs for the integration of women in the Latin American Region. A Plan of Action was adopted during its Regional Conference on the Integration of Women in the Economic and Social Development of Latin America, convened in Havana, Cuba, June 13-17, 1977. This Plan will facilitate program and project planning and implementation. The Commission has headquarters in Santiago, Chile and sub-regional offices in Mexico City and Port-of-Spain, Trinidad.

A major project of the Inter-American Commission of Women, a specialized body of the Organization of American States established in 1928, has been the creation and strengthening of women's bureaus in the Latin American countries. The Commission has sponsored several seminars on this subject.

A Multinational Women's Center for Research and Training was inaugurated in Argentina in May 1978 to aid in the achievement of the objectives and goals of the Regional Plan of Action for the Women's Decade in the Americas.

The Plan of Action for the English-speaking countries of the Caribbean, adopted during the seminar on the integration of women in development convened in Jamaica in June 1977, recommended the appointment of a regional coordinator for women's programs by the University of the West Indies. The Coordinator, appointed in August 1978, will work within the framework of the Extra-Mural Department of the University; will assist governments in the setting up of national machinery; and will serve as a catalyst in promoting programs and projects which strengthen the role of women in the Caribbean Community.

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